

Bigarrures folatres et mesdisantes: A Curio from Pierre de L'Estoile's Cabinet?

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Recent research into the political culture of the Wars of Religion has demonstrated the importance of libellous publications in the civil wars. As rival parties took up positions in the conflict, writers and their patrons used literary publications to support their claims to honour, status, and political advantage. Through these texts writers cultivated a poetics of obscenity, gossip, and slander that both denounced and illustrated the moral decline of their times. They deployed common genres, tropes, and arguments throughout their disputes, and pursued a range of publishing strategies between manuscript and print. Research into this political culture has transformed our understanding of the Wars of Religion as a period of great literary energy and creativity, giving much needed attention to anonymous, clandestine, and subversive texts, while re-evaluating the involvement of significant writers in the conflicts of their times.¹

The libels collected by the diarist Pierre de L'Estoile (1546-1611), *audencier* and *secrétaire du roi* in the Paris Chancery, provide a major source for this research.² L'Estoile's collecting activities preserved a large number of texts from this period that testify to the circulation of libels during the civil wars. He copied the libels that he collected from his sources throughout Paris into his manuscript miscellanies and diaries, where he often commented on the subjects or authors of these texts and deployed them to illustrate particular passages.³ While the publication of L'Estoile's diaries is ongoing with Droz under the general editorship of Gilbert Schrenck, building on previous editions such as the major edition published by Pierre Gustave Brunet in the late nineteenth century, many of his miscellaneous manuscripts remain unpublished.⁴ This article presents a case for another miscellaneous collection, the anonymous 'Bigarrures folatres et mesdisantes', contained in BnF Cinq Cents

Colbert 488, fos. 306v-554r and available via Gallica, as being closely linked to L'Estoile's cabinet, perhaps even having been copied directly from one of his miscellanies that has since been lost.⁵

The Cinq Cents Colbert collection in the BnF was formed by Jean-Baptiste Colbert as part of his strategy of accumulating prestige at the royal court through cultural patronage and mastering the information networks of the kingdom.⁶ Perhaps libels from the Wars of Religion seemed relevant to understanding the troubles of the mid-seventeenth century Frondes which were similarly contested in scandalous and defamatory publications. Of the 413 distinct pieces copied into the 'Bigarrures folatres et mesdisantes' – a mix of French and Latin, with a preponderance of verse over prose – forty-two pieces are shared with L'Estoile's diary for the reign of Henri III. They are scrupulously noted, along with occasional variations in orthography, in the notes to the Droz edition.⁷ Elsewhere in the manuscript, copied in the same scribal hand, are pieces concerning the genealogy of the dukes of the duchy of Burgundy, personalities in the civil wars, monetary reform, and Parisian and European politics between 1618 and 1620, which suggests an earliest possible date for the compilation.⁸

The frontispiece of the 'Bigarrures folatres et mesdisantes' reproduces a distinctive commonplace found in several of L'Estoile's manuscripts: 'Qui veult faire cesser les escrits, et blaisons, qu'il s'adonne a bien faire, car il est aussy peu en la puissance de toute la faculté terienne d'engarder la liberté franchoise de parler comme d'enfourir le soleil en terre, ou l'enfermer dedans un trou.'⁹ L'Estoile deployed this commonplace on the frontispiece to his diary for the reign of Henri III and reworked it in a discussion of the libels he collected that criticised the duc de Sourdis in April 1595.¹⁰ Like many commonplaces found in libels in this period, L'Estoile derived this trope from another text, a libel published in the 1560s in defence of the cardinal de Lorraine against the prince of Hynaut.¹¹ The commonplace serves

L'Estoile as a distinctive emblem for an 'art of containment' in his diaries, of copying and denouncing licentious words as testimony to immorality of his age.¹²

The topics covered by the 'Bigarrures folatres et mesdisantes' are entirely in accord with L'Estoile's collecting habits. The miscellany combines pieces on contemporary mores and sexuality with others concerning the politics of the civil wars, as well as several that circulated among the erudite world of royal office-holders in the Palais de Justice, for example the 'Double d'une lettre qui couroit entre les advocats du barreau du Palais à Paris en Septembre, 1585' that cruelly caricatured notable *avocats* ambitious to rise in the hierarchy of the court.¹³ In particular, the content of the 'Bigarrures folatres et mesdisantes' is complementary with L'Estoile's poetry miscellany 'Receuil diverses de ce temps' (BnF ms. fr. 10304) as they both cover similar topics in a comparable timespan (c.1530 to 1585-86) without overlapping pieces. The absence in the 'Receuil diverses de ce temps' of such major texts as the polemics exchanged between Pierre de Ronsard and his Protestant critics is difficult to explain unless L'Estoile copied them elsewhere. These polemics appear prominently in the 'Bigarrures folatres et mesdisantes'.¹⁴ Reinforcing the sense that these miscellanies are complementary, the first thirty-eight pieces of another anonymous late sixteenth-century miscellany, 'Recueil de poésies satiriques sur Henry III et son époque' (BnF ms. fr. 1662), are shared with the 'Bigarrures folatres et mesdisantes' and the 'Receuil diverses de ce temps' often the pieces that these two manuscripts share with L'Estoile's diaries for the reign of Henri III.

The paratextual apparatus of the 'Bigarrures folatres et mesdisantes' fits directly with L'Estoile's manuscripts, especially the 'Receuil diverses de ce temps'. Both miscellanies set pieces in a broadly chronological order, with occasional marginal glosses and introductions. In its title as well as its generic range, the 'Bigarrures folatres et mesdisantes' also resembles the first half of L'Estoile's miscellany 'Recueil divers, bigarrés, du grave et du facétieux, du

bon et du mauvais, selon le temps' (BnF ms. fr. 25560), a miscellany that combines ribald poems about gender and sexuality with caricatures of figures at the royal court.¹⁵ Like the autograph manuscripts of L'Estoile's diaries, all of these miscellaneous manuscripts use stars, underlining, and three bars for emphasis that are typical of L'Estoile's engagement with notable passages.

Commentaries on certain pieces within the 'Bigarrures folatres et mesdisantes' reveal further links with L'Estoile's collection. A Latin epigram concerning the entrance of the sieur de Grandru into the Parlement is introduced 'Monsieur Marteau, mon beau frere, fist sur ce subject, l'epigramme latin suivant', referring to L'Estoile's brother-in-law, the Neo-Latin poet and *avocat* in the Parlement Claude de Marteau.¹⁶ Common introductory glosses to pieces in both the 'Bigarrures folatres et mesdisantes' and L'Estoile's diary for the reign of Henri III shape readers' engagement with them. The miscellany introduces René Belleau's obscene poem 'Jan qui ne peult' as composed by a learned gentleman, then criticised it because the 'lascivious villainies' of his verses sullied his reputation, while the near identical passage in L'Estoile's diary only gently qualifies this same statement by claiming that the attribution to Belleau is not certain, and that the poem also 'rings badly in Christian ears'.¹⁷

Other possible scenarios might explain the close connection between L'Estoile's diary for the reign of Henri III and the 'Bigarrures folatres et mesdisantes'. Pieces in the miscellany might have been copied directly from the diary by someone who had access to L'Estoile's manuscripts, although it is not clear how widely they circulated after his death.¹⁸ While these points cannot establish without doubt that this miscellany has been copied from one that belonged to L'Estoile's collection, nevertheless they demonstrate the close links between this miscellany and L'Estoile's diary for the reign of Henri III, and the importance of tracing correspondences and variants of texts as well as engaging in close readings of their content in order to better understand their contemporary impact. If the manuscript of the 'Bigarrures

folatres et mesdisantes' concluded on fo. 554r that 'Beaucoup de bons mots sortent souvent des bouches les plus impies et prophanes', scholars have only begun to revise such condescending attitudes to non-canonical texts. Further research into manuscript miscellanies is crucial to understanding the culture of libelling in this period and its place in wider literary and political developments in early modern France.

¹ See above all Hugh Roberts, 'Obscenity in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century France', *French Studies*, 67 (2013), pp. 535-542; Tatiana Debbagi Baranova, *A coups de libelles: une culture politique au temps des guerres de religion (1562-1598)* (Geneva: Droz, 2012).

² Pierre de L'Estoile, *Registre-journal du règne de Henri III*, (eds) Madeleine Lazard and Gilbert Schrenck, 6 vols. (Geneva: Droz, 1992-2003) [hereafter JH3]; Pierre de L'Estoile, *Registre-Journal du règne de Henri IV, 1589-1594*, (eds) Gilbert Schrenck and Xavier Le Person, 2 vols. (Geneva: Droz, 2010-4).

³ Gilbert Schrenck, 'La réception des rams dans le *Journal du règne de Henri III* de Pierre de L'Estoile (1574-1589)' in *Les écrits courts à vocation polémique*, (eds) Barbara Ertlé and Martin Gosman (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2006), pp. 15-25.

⁴ Certain of L'Estoile's miscellanies are published in *Fragments de recueils de Pierre de L'Estoile, édition critique originale*, (ed.) Isabelle Armitage (Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Publications, 1976); *Mémoires-journaux de Pierre de L'Estoile*, (ed.) Pierre Gustave Brunet (Paris: Librairie des bibliophiles, 1875-1906) [hereafter MJ], vols. 4 and 11.

⁵ <<http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b10511040b>> [accessed 9 December 2015]. L'Estoile mentioned lending out manuscripts from his collection that have not survived, notably giving Pierre Dupuy texts concerning the Catholic League: MJ, ix, 196 (1609-01-08), 202 (1609-01-12), 203-4 (1609-01-16), 206 (1609-01-21), 212 (1609-01-31).

⁶ Jacob Soll, *The Information Master: Jean-Baptiste Colbert's Secret State Intelligence System* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2009); Denise Bloch, 'La bibliothèque de Colbert' in Claude Jolly (ed.), *Histoire des bibliothèques françaises II. Les bibliothèques sous l'Ancien Régime, 1530-1789* (Paris: Promodis-Editions du Cercle de la librairie, 1988), pp. 157-179; Charles de La Roncière, *Catalogue des manuscrits de la collection des Cinq Cents de Colbert* (Paris: Ernest Leroux, 1908).

⁷ JH3, i, 126-127 n.62, 129 n.67, 237 n.38, ii, 158 n.11, 158 n.17, 159 n.18, 159 n.19, 159 n.20, 159 n.21, 159 n.23, 167 n.103, 167 n.105, 167 n.107, 167 n.108, 167 n.110, 167 n.113-114, 168 n.120, 169 n.134, 169 n.135, 169 n.138, 170 n.140, 242 n.12, 242 n.14, 245 n.38, 245 n.39, 245 n.40, 246 n.43, 247 n.55, 247 n.58, 252 n.103, iii, 84 n.73, 85 n.74, 85 n.75, 85 n.76, 85 n.77, 128 n.64, 129 n.74, 133 n.90, 134 n.92, iv, 53 n.31, v, 248 n.15. JH3, v, 248 n.15 attributes the miscellany to the collection of Henri de Mesmes, although it presents no evidence for this attribution.

⁸ A list of titles of many of the pieces, following a contents page in the manuscript, is given in La Roncière, *Catalogue*, 290-5.

⁹ BnF Cinq Cents Colbert 488, fo. 306v.

¹⁰ JH3, i, 53 (frontispiece); MJ, vii, 25-6 (1595-04).

¹¹ *Faits et dicts memorables de plusieurs grans personnages et seigneurs françois, & de choses rares & secretes aduenues en France* (1565), p. 7, identified in Baranova, *A coups de libelles*, p. 470.

¹² Antónia Szabari, *Less Rightly Said: Scandals and Readers in Sixteenth-Century France* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010), pp. 189-98.

¹³ BnF Cinq Cents Colbert 488, fos. 464r-71r.

¹⁴ BnF Cinq Cents Colbert 488, fos. 334v, 371v-7r, 435r-7v; Pierre de Ronsard, *Oeuvres complètes*, (eds) Jean Céard, Daniel Ménager, Michel Simonin, (Paris: Gallimard, 1995), ii, 1059-60; Jacques Pineaux (ed.), *La polémique protestante contre Ronsard* (Paris: Marcel Didier, 1973).

¹⁵ Published in MJ, xi, 143-409.

¹⁶ BnF Cinq Cents Colbert 488, fo. 383r; JH3, v, 173 (1586-01), 248 n.15.

¹⁷ BnF Cinq Cents Colbert 488, fo. 550r; JH3, ii, 141 (1577-09), 167 n.144. For another example, poems about Henri III's *mignons*, compare BnF Cinq Cents Colbert 488, fol. 505v-6r; JH3, ii, 42-9 (1576-07).

¹⁸ L'Estoile occasionally lent the manuscript for his diary for the reign of Henri III – MJ, viii, 260 (1606-12-14), 353-4 (1607-10-20) – and Pierre Dupuy published it in a severely abridged in 1621 – but most of L'Estoile's

manuscripts seem to have remained within his family. See Florence Greffe and José Lothe, *La vie, les livres et les lectures de Pierre de L'Estoile: nouvelles recherches* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2002), pp. 1043-7.